

USING PHOTOSHOP'S QUICK MASK MODE

Introduction

Masking in Photoshop can help you create images with greater impact by applying special effects or adjustments to selected areas rather than the entire image. Masks can be as complicated as you want to make them, revealing as much or as little of the base image to work on as you wish. What follows is an explanation of how to create a simple mask using the Quick Mask mode in Photoshop.

Getting started

In this article we are going to recreate the effect of a graduate ND filter that might ordinarily be used when taking a picture. Such a filter is often used to darken down a very bright sky which might otherwise appear white. A typical problem that this is intended to solve is where the lower part of an image is very dark and the top half is very bright.

The first step is to open a suitable image where you would like to bring the sky and ground more into line. An example of such an image can be seen below.



As you can see the foreground is very dark and underexposed but the sky is very light and bright. When taking this picture I had already used a 0.9ND Graduated filter but the sky was too bright for even that. If I had not used a filter at all the sky would have been completely white and without any cloud detail. It's important to remember that even if you intend to use the Quick mask technique explained here it's still wise to use a ND Graduated filters to help retain detail. If there is no detail in the sky you won't have anything to work with, although you could use advanced masking techniques to replace the entire sky.

Having selected and opened your image switch into Quick Mask mode by clicking on the Quick Mask icon (a grey rectangle with a white circle) in



the Photoshop tools pallet. This is shown to the right here (top row, right hand icon).

Once in Quick Mask mode you can begin work on painting in the mask. To do this we will use the gradient tool from the Photoshop tools pallet. This can be seen in the image to the right (the icon shown in the bottom right). You should ensure that the gradient is painting from white to black.



Use the gradient tool to paint a gradient onto your image from a point near to where the bright sky ends and down into the dark area. This will probably take you a few attempts before you master the technique, just keep experimenting. To some degree where you paint the mask is down to artistic representation. In some instances (as here) I like to include some of the mountain tops in the sky as this can help create other effects such as valley mist.

When you have drawn the gradient you will notice that it actually leaves part of the image clear but turns other parts a ruby red colour. This can be seen in the image below.



The way to interpret this is that when you make adjustments to the image, the areas in red will be unaffected, the changes only being applied to the areas that are clear. Where the red colour is graduated (because we used the gradient tool), the changes will be graduated to help blend them seamlessly into the image. This can also be used to create some interesting effects with practice.

Now switch back to the Standard editing mode in Photoshop. The icon for this (a white circle on a white rectangle) is also found on the tools pallet and is to the left of the Quick Mask mode icon used previously. When you click this the red colour will be removed and the clear area will become a selection as illustrated below.



At this point, it can be useful to save your selection so that you can return to it later in the editing process. One of the limitations of using the Quick Mask mode is that the mask you created isn't saved with the image, which can make future editing difficult. To save the selection, select "Select|Save Selection..." from the menu. This will cause a dialog to be displayed as shown below.



Save your selection as a new channel called "Sky" and then click OK. If you check the Channels window you will see the new Sky channel that has been created. If you want to know how to use Channels for masking you will need to check out the Channels masking tutorial that will be added soon to the Lenscraft web site.

At this point it's tempting to simply apply an adjustment directly to the selected area. There is however a much better way to make your changes using layers. This involves creating a new layer by copying the selected area of the sky and then blending it with the base image. To do this select "Layer|New|Layer via Copy" from the menu. This will create a new layer (Layer 1), which can be seen in the Layers window (as shown below).



In the Layers window select Layer 1 by clicking on it. We will now change the blending mode from “Normal” to “Multiply”. This is done using the drop down list at the top of the Layers window. When you change the blending mode you will notice an immediate difference to the sky as shown below.



It is quite likely that this change is too severe for most peoples taste so you can reduce the effect by reducing the Opacity level down from 100% using the Opacity slider in the Layers window.

Once you have adjusted your image to balance out the brightness you can complete the editing process by adjusting overall contrast, brightness etc to arrive at a final well exposed image.

When complete, save your image as a file type that supports layers, I would suggest using the Photoshop's PSD format. Now flatten the image to merge all the layers together by selecting “Layer|Flatten” Image from the menu. Save the finished image as either a JPG or TIF file.